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Always some interesting twists.

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## PUBLIC LANDS

### Dems defy Trump, propose bill to save 9.2M acres in Utah

Scott Streeter, E&E News reporter

*Published: Thursday, April 27, 2017*

Senate Democrats yesterday reintroduced legislation to protect 9.2 million acres of federal lands in southern Utah's scenic red rock region — the same day President Trump signed an executive order that could dramatically alter dozens of national monuments, including two large ones in the Beehive State.

Illinois Sen. Dick Durbin's "America's Red Rock Wilderness Act of 2017" would designate an enormous area as federal wilderness, including Desolation and Labyrinth canyons, the Dirty Devil River, Lower Bitter Creek, White Canyon, and the San Rafael Swell — all currently managed by the Bureau of Land Management.

The [bill](#) is a companion to legislation filed earlier this month by Rep. Alan Lowenthal (D-Calif.) that has 30 co-sponsors, all Democrats, from 17 states ([E&E Daily](#), April 7).

Durbin's bill has 17 co-sponsors from 13 states, all Democrats, including Sens.

Michael Bennet of Colorado, Martin Heinrich of New Mexico and Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts.

The Durbin and Lowenthal bills are similar to legislation both lawmakers spearheaded two years ago that drew strong support from conservation groups but never gained any traction in Congress ([Greenwire](#), May 21, 2015).

"Designating these lands as wilderness would safeguard wildlife; protect ancestral lands; help mitigate climate change; and provide access to future generations of hunters, anglers, hikers, boaters and lovers of the natural world," Durbin said yesterday during a speech on the Senate floor.

But though Durbin argued strongly for the need to protect the "fragile landscape," the legislation has no Republican co-sponsors and is not supported by Utah's congressional delegation, making it a long shot to be approved.

Indeed, Durbin's speech occurred shortly after President Trump signed an [executive order](#) requiring the Interior Department to review the boundaries of dozens of national monuments designated within the last two decades and to decide whether they should be altered or eliminated ([Greenwire](#), April 26).

That includes two highly contentious Utah monuments — the 1.35-million-acre Bears Ears National Monument designated by President Obama in December and the 1.9-million-acre Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument established by President Clinton in 1996.

Trump, who was joined at a signing ceremony by Utah Gov. Gary Herbert (R), said Utah Republican Sens. Orrin Hatch and Mike Lee pushed him hard to sign the order.

Durbin's bill would designate portions within the Grand Staircase-Escalante monument as wilderness.

Thus, Durbin took the opportunity during yesterday's speech to rip Trump's executive order.

"The president's decision to review these national monuments puts the future of these resources in jeopardy and threatens our culture, history and heritage," Durbin said. "These monuments are for all of us, and we must ensure that they remain in their natural condition for current and future generations to enjoy."

Still, debate over the red rock desert region has been ongoing since the late Rep. Wayne Owens (D-Utah) introduced legislation to protect the area in 1989. Owens did so after a group of Utah residents submitted a proposed citizen's wilderness designation.

One of the staunchest opponents of previous versions of the red rock wilderness

legislation is House Natural Resources Chairman Rob Bishop (R-Utah), who earlier this week vowed to push through legislation "right-sizing" the Bears Ears monument and overhauling the Antiquities Act, which allows presidents to bypass Congress and designate federal lands as national monuments (*E&E Daily*, April 26).

But conservation groups note that the companion bills by Durbin and Lowenthal make sense in Utah, a state that has less designated wilderness — 1.1 million acres — than any Western state except for Hawaii.

And it's particularly important in light of Trump's executive order, said Scott Groene, executive director of the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance.

"Sen. Durbin understands what this administration does not: that these lands are one of our country's most precious and vulnerable treasures, and the most reasonable course of action is to ensure their permanent protection," Groene said in a statement regarding the reintroduction of Durbin's bill.

"Utah's wilderness promotes resiliency against climate change for humans and wildlife alike, provides a place for families to find rest and solitude, and represents the highest values of the American people," he added. "We are grateful to Sen. Durbin and the senators who joined him for recognizing the true value of these lands and for standing up for them."

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